

Saratoga in The American Revolution

Sep 19, 1777 – Oct 17, 1777

In 1777, ambitious General John Burgoyne convinced the British ministry that he could deal a devastating blow to the Americans by leading an army from Canada south through Lake Champlain and into the Hudson River valley while General Howe led an army up the Hudson River from New York.

Secretary of State Lord Germaine bought it; and so in June 1777, Burgoyne departed Canada with a force of almost 8000 men.

By 7 July, Burgoyne's army had taken Fort Ticonderoga and Skenesboro. But the general, aka Gentleman Johnny and Pomposo, was as vain and unwise as he was ambitious. He issued a statement condemning the Americans' "unnatural rebellion" and threatening to turn the regions' Indians loose on them. Nothing could have better galvanized the militia resistance to him. Burgoyne also dragged along an enormous baggage train that included 30 carts filled with his own "supplies", for example, his mistress. Another officer brought his wife and three daughters along for the adventure; several others brought personal servants.

Therefore, as Burgoyne's army entered the dense woods below Skenesboro, progress came to a grinding halt. It took almost a month to travel the 25 miles to Stillwell on the Hudson and easier going. But by then, he was running short of supplies. He sent a detachment to Bennington, New York to commandeer provisions, but they ran into John Starks and a force of New Hampshire militia recently inspired to fight, at least partially, by Burgoyne's outlandish proclamation. At Bennington, the entire British party was either killed or captured.

Burgoyne's men were exhausted and his army was short on supplies. But he decided to press on toward Albany. On 19 September, however, he ran into American General Horatio Gates and a rapidly growing force of Continental regulars and militia at Bemis Heights. Burgoyne tried to break through the enemies' line the first time on September 19. But, suffering more than 600 casualties, he was forced to withdraw.

Burgoyne dug in believing that it was just a matter of time before Howe sent reinforcements from the south. But after three weeks of waiting, and no reinforcements, he decided to test the American lines again. Pomposo, however, knew virtually nothing about the terrain or the American deployments. As he advanced, he suddenly realized his error and brilliantly brought his 1500 men to a halt in the middle of a wheat field. At this point, Daniel Morgan's riflemen

peppered him from the woods on both his left and his right while Benedict Arnold led a dashing charge against the center of his stunned lines.

Burgoyne, realizing all too late that he was in trouble, fell back to Saratoga. But by now the American forces had almost doubled as militia poured in from all directions. Finally recognizing the impossible odds, Burgoyne surrendered his entire army of almost 6000 men on 17 October.

Saratoga was devastating for the British cause. The loss of 6000 men, 27 canons, 5000 small arms, and the other remnants of Burgoyne's ridiculous baggage train was bad enough. But the diplomatic consequences were even greater. France, who had been waiting for proof that the Americans might win before extending support, rushed into action. Not only were French officials convinced that the colonies might prevail, they worried that Burgoyne's defeat might prompt conciliatory overtures from Britain to America. The last thing France wanted was the war to end with anything but a crushing and colony-sacrificing defeat for their historic enemy. Therefore French diplomats quickly offered commercial and military alliance to the American colonies.

The battle also elevated the reputation of Horatio Gates. Some even suggested that he should replace Washington at the top of the command structure. That would not happen. But his success encouraged those who appreciated his use of the colonial militia. While other commanders, including Washington, had struggled with how to use the unpredictable and undisciplined militia in battle, Gates used them effectively at Saratoga.